

Gyorgy Lukacs

Gyorgy (Georg) Lukacs (1885-1971), Hungarian philosopher, literary theorist, and leading Communist. Influenced by contemporary philosophers like Dilthey, Husserl, Lask, Simmel and Weber, the young Lukacs constructed a tragic *Weltanschauung* in literary and aesthetic studies such as *Soul and Form* (1910), *Aesthetic Culture* (1913) and *The Theory of the Novel* (1916). Lukacs began to reject neo-Kantianism by 1911 and in 1918 made the transition from ethical anti-capitalism to Marxist revolutionary. Lukacs thereafter produced the seminal work of twentieth century Marxist philosophy, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923).

Enthused by the proximity of revolution Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* (HCC) departed sharply from vulgar, positivistic materialism and brought Marxism closer to contemporary European philosophy. Its influence extended to Bloch, Mannheim, Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Korsch, Sartre, Lefebvre, Merleau-Ponty, and Marcuse. It has also been fiercely criticised by both sympathetic thinkers like Meszaros as well as defenders of orthodoxy like Zinoviev. It was later repudiated in the 1930s by Lukacs himself, who went on to produce such major studies as *The Historical Novel* (1937), *The Young Hegel* (1938) and *Towards an Ontology of Social Being* (1971).

In HCC Lukacs' dialectically transcended 'the antinomies of bourgeois thought' by reworking German Idealism through a symptomatic re-reading of Marx. For Lukacs revolutionary praxis transcends the antinomies of contemplative thought, replacing the formal possibility of the moral 'ought' with the objective possibility of the historical process itself. Lukacs' found the 'practical essence' of Marxism in its dialectical conception of totality as a concrete process and notoriously claimed that even if Marxism was falsified empirically its dialectical method would still remain capable of bearing further development.

Lukacs' central preoccupation concerned the objective possibility of proletarian revolution under conditions of capitalist reification. If reification obscures the social character of commodity relations how might a subject emerge to overthrow exploitation? Lukacs' saw the proletariat in Hegelian terms as 'the identical subject-object' of commodity society because it occupies a unique standpoint that allows

capitalism to be grasped as a totality. Wage labourers can become self-conscious of themselves as special sorts of commodities that put into motion and make possible the entire commodity system as both its cause and its presupposition.

Perhaps the most contentious aspect of *HCC* has been Lukacs' notion of *zugerechnet*, or 'ascribed' class consciousness. Lukacs 'infers' consciousness to a shared class position rather than as an 'empirically-given' individual consciousness:

By relating consciousness to the whole of society it becomes possible to infer the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were *able* to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society.

Some critics like Althusser took this to be 'an idealist and voluntarist interpretation of Marxism as the exclusive product and expression of proletarian practice'. Others saw it in terms of a rationalistic denial of empirical or psychological consciousness. Each merely reproduces the unmediated antimonies that Lukacs criticized, on the one side formal abstractions and on the other empiricist reductions, and neglect 'the higher reality' of total development beyond empirical 'facts' or theoretical schema.

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